

A 'Cookbook' of Wiretapping Recipes

Bugs Discovered in Privacy Project

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The White House paid a private research firm \$47,000 last year to produce what amounts to a do-it-yourself handbook for anyone who wants to learn the art of tapping a neighbor's or business competitor's telephone.

The 13-page document is entitled "Selected Examples of Possible Approaches to Electronic Communication Interception Operations." But it might more aptly have been called "Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Wiretapping—But Were Afraid to Ask."

By following the easy-to-read, step-by-step instructions, the uninitiated

can pick up the fine points of eavesdropping on phone conversations in "a residential area similar to that found in Northern Virginia." The manual also tells how these techniques can be adapted to tapping long-distance calls or even to extracting information being sent via computer to a data processing center.

White House officials involved in the project, which was initiated during Ford administration, say they really weren't trying to bring the wiretapper's skills within easy reach of anyone handy with a set of tools. Instead, they insist, the original aim was to see whether the public needed greater protection from invasions of its privacy.

But somehow, something got lost in the translation from idea to actuality. The result was what one of the officials involved candidly calls "a cookbook of electronic eavesdropping recipes."

The existence of this latest contribution to the literature on the federal government's fascination with wiretapping was discovered by Rep. John E. Moss (D-Calif.), a member of the House Subcommittee on Government Information and Individual Rights. On Thursday, Moss wrote to the General Accounting Office, Congress's watchdog on government operations, and requested a full investigation of

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the circumstances that produced this "remarkable document."

Moss's discovery also poses some potentially sticky problems for President Carter's staff aides, who say they learned about the document's existence only a couple of days ago.

One White House assistant, who asked not to be identified, said there is general agreement that the document should be kept out of circulation. But, he pointed out, anyone theoretically can get a copy simply by asking for it under the Freedom of Information Act.

He added that the problem would not be solved if the White House destroyed those copies in its possession. Several bootleg copies are known to be floating around outside the White House gates, and there's no telling how quickly they might proliferate in the age of the instant copying machine.

The project began last year in the White House Office of Telecommunications Policy, which is charged with advising the President on national electronic communications questions.

William J. Thaler, acting director of the office, said yesterday that the purpose was to determine how easy it was for unauthorized persons to inter-

cept traffic on commercial communications systems. The information collected was to be used in possible policy recommendations for increased legal safeguards, Thaler added.

Accordingly, OTP awarded the contract for the study to the Mitre Corp. of McLean, Va., which has performed research for the federal defense and intelligence establishments.

Mitre's researchers concluded that wiretapping is a relatively easy thing to do in the United States, and their findings were contained in what Thaler describes as "two fat, scholarly and highly technical volumes" that can now be purchased from the government's National Technical Information Service for \$7.50 each.

What happened next is disputed. Charles Joyce, a Mitre management official, says that John Metalski, an OTP official coordinating the project, complained that the two volumes were too technical to be easily understood.

"He said the message doesn't come across," Joyce recalled, "and he asked if we could boil some of the material down into very simple terms so his key policy people would be able to get the point we are making about the ease with which electronic interceptions could be made. That little third volume was the result."

Metalski, who since has left OTP,

could not be reached yesterday for comment. Thaler, however, said his recollection differs from Joyce's.

"The Mitre people said they had used a case-study approach and asked if we wanted their methodology on how to do specific surveillances put on paper," Thaler said. "I told them no, but there apparently was some misunderstanding. Somehow, they apparently got the impression—whether from Metalski or whoever—that we wanted them to go ahead."

The result, Thaler added, was that in January, in the midst of the transition from the Ford to the Carter administration, "this so-called third volume came in uninvited."

Thaler said, "I saw immediately that this wasn't the sort of material that should be handed out for anyone to get their hands on." Instead of putting it out for public distribution as had been done with the two earlier volumes, Thaler continued, he put the 12 copies of the third volume under lock and key.

They remained locked away until this week when Moss's letter to the GAO revealed their existence.

"It's a silly document that should never have been done," said the White House official. "But it was done, and now we don't really know what to do about it."